Mobile Learning for Languages: Can the Past Speak to the Future?

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Mobile Technologies for Language Learning: Three Guiding Questions

In a central chapter in her book *English Language Learning and Technology*, Chapelle describes the technologizing of learning and teaching at her own university:

> As far as I can tell, it was the president of the university who decided that the English Department should have approximately 12 computer labs as a part of an effort to make the university have a high tech look. It seems very unlikely that he first weighed the research results on teaching English in a computer lab before making this decision.
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> (Chapelle, 2003, p. 73)

Ten years later, this same trend continues with newer and more portable devices and tools. In this paper, Traxler points to the fact that the prevalence and accessibility of mobile technologies means that stakeholders are eager to commit to using them for language teaching without consulting relevant learning theories and research to guide implementation and expectations. Organizations like TIRF offer opportunities for both research and dissemination through the funding of studies to investigate key questions for MALL and to disseminate these findings in position statements and white papers for policy makers and administrators or podcasts and guidelines for practitioners.

Below are three broad questions to guide inquiry that arose from my own research in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and my experience as a teacher trainer:

1. What kind of language is generated when using or interacting via mobile devices?

One of the concerns of incorporating new technologies into language learning is the effect the technology has on the kind of language and language strategies learners actually engage in. A comparison of learner language in spoken versus computer-mediated interaction using text-chat has been the focus of research since the 1990s (Sauro, 2012), but the quickly changing affordances of mobile technologies introduce new possibilities. For instance, prior to the prevalence of T9 predictive text on mobile phones, those who wished to send text messages might have relied on abbreviations (e.g., *b4* instead of *before*) or other types of reduced language for greater efficiency. While T9 predictive text makes such shorthand unnecessary, it also pushes learners to recognize and accept or reject predicted words, serving as a potential prompt for learning new words or avoiding unfamiliar words.

Mobile devices also have the potential to serve as data collection tools. Existing or future applications can capture the kind of language L2 learners produce, the frequency of specific tools and applications accessed when communicating in the target language, and the relationship between the use of these tools and language use in other contexts.

2. For what types of learners is MALL most effective?

As Traxler indicates, mobile technologies are indeed prevalent in many contexts. However, in my own experience teaching in both the United States and Sweden, the digital divide is present and visible even within university classrooms. While many of my students do indeed possess smartphones and tablets, others make due with more basic mobile phones that support only voice calls and limited texting. In many cases, this situation is driven by financial need. In others, it represents the students' own desires not to open themselves up to additional sources of data or distraction.

Sheen's (2008) study of the effectiveness of recasts for language learners with high or low classroom anxiety illustrates how individual learner factors can mediate the efficacy of language teaching practices. The same issue is worth exploring for all teaching practices and technologies, including the tools of MALL.

3. What are the social and institutional factors that drive or limit the effective implementation of MALL?

Beyond individual learner choices, a myriad of social factors can affect the implementation of MALL to support learning. Warshauer, Knobel, and Stone's (2004) qualitative investigation of the integration of technology into the curriculum of eight California public schools identified a variety of environmental and social constraints that affected the educational quality of technology use in these different schools. Such factors included the current state of the technology as well as curricular limitations on the purpose and function of computer-based learning.

Similar social and institutional factors can affect the integration and use of MALL. With mobile technology being a constantly changing and growing facet in the lives of many, such qualitative inquiry remains a relevant approach to documenting the change, or lack of change, in the social and institutional factors influencing effective practice.

References

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